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SUBJECT: CHANGING HUMANITARIAN PRIORITIES IN ZIMBABWE

REF: HARARE 256

SUMMARY

1. As Zimbabwe enters its third year of international humanitarian relief, there has been a shift in the thinking of the major donors and international development agencies with regard to how best to address the crisis. Most donors and NGOs have been responding to the immediate humanitarian needs -- to identify and feed highly vulnerable people and to ensure food security through the provision of limited amounts of emergency agricultural inputs -- since February 2002. But donors are increasingly convinced that we cannot continue with the same approach to humanitarian assistance for several reasons, including concern over the growing dependency, limited evidence of serious malnutrition, and ongoing transparency and coordination problems with the GOZ. Donors are moving towards a consensus that general food distributions should be phased out in favor of highly targeted feeding programs. Surprisingly, the GOZ has come to the same conclusion -- but for different reasons.-----

-----BACKGROUND-----

2. The United States Government (USG) has contributed substantial food assistance to Zimbabwe over the past two years, through the Office of Food for Peace and the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance Development partners and implementing agencies include: the World Food Program (WFP), World Vision (WV), Catholic Relief Services (CRS), and an NGO consortium of WV, CARE International (CARE), and CRS, known as C-SAFE (the Consortium for the Southern Africa Food Security Emergency).

3. "Non-food" assistance through USAID/OFDA has been focused on agricultural inputs, water/sanitation, assistance to internally displaced persons (IDPs), humanitarian coordination and information systems.

-----SHIFTING DONOR PERSPECTIVES-----

4. Donors, NGOs and international development agencies have been busy responding to the immediate complex humanitarian crisis in Zimbabwe. Their priority has been to target highly vulnerable people and to ensure food security through the provision of food aid and emergency agricultural inputs.

5. Lately, however, there is growing concern among the donor community over whether the on-going humanitarian assistance programs are the most appropriate interventions. This concern is the result of a number of factors, including: (1) fears over the contribution of general food distributions to increased dependency in the country; 2) there are public reports in the state-controlled media that the GOZ's Grain Marketing Board (GMB) is stockpiling grain, reportedly totalling 240,000 metric tons at present, and still refusing to be transparent about distribution plans or coordinate with international relief efforts, while donors have scurried to import grain to feed Zimbabwe's people; and (3) malnutrition rates in the country are low and do not appear to be increasing (many of the acutely malnourished are likely HIV/AIDs affected).

6. As Zimbabwe enters its third year of international humanitarian relief, there is a definite shift in the thinking of many donors and international development agencies with regard to how best to assist the country. Development partners are considering ways to inject activities into their emergency aid programs that will

better promote sustainable livelihoods (see: SEPTTEL on DFID Recovery Workshop) and are designing activities that steer towards recovery, at least in communal farming areas (those not subject to fast-track land reform). They are also discussing phasing out general distribution, which although already targeted at the most vulnerable groups, might yet be more narrowly targeted.

NEW GOZ PERSPECTIVES

17. Surprisingly, the GOZ is also coming to the same conclusion -- that general feeding programs should be discontinued. A new Consolidated Appeal has been prepared by the UN to address the emergency situation in Zimbabwe. But the government has requested that all reference to general feeding be omitted from the appeal. Apparently, the GOZ has not yet decided whether it will request emergency food aid in the coming year or even renew the Memorandum of Understanding with World Food Program when the current one expires in June.

18. At a meeting between the UN and senior GOZ officials, held in Victoria Falls on the weekend of February 14th, the GOZ presented several reasons to the UN why they are dissatisfied with the current status of international humanitarian assistance in Zimbabwe. According to UN Resident Representative Victor Angelo, who briefed donors on Monday, February 23rd, GOZ officials complained that NGOs implementing humanitarian assistance programs are creating parallel structures that duplicate government systems rather than trying to work through the existing government structures. The GOZ further complained that NGOs often carry out activities on the ground without first consulting with government authorities or local officials. The GOZ stated that general food distributions are creating dependency among local populations, and they asserted that future assistance should be better targeted, most likely focusing on orphans, the chronically ill, and other highly vulnerable groups. Finally, they alleged that donors are exaggerating the humanitarian crisis in Zimbabwe for their own political purposes.

19. At his briefing with international donors, the UN Resident Representative also revealed that the President's office has instructed relevant ministries to arrange for the purchase and importation of 800,000 metric tons of grain this year. The President's office has instructed the Reserve Bank to come up with the necessary funds, estimated at approximately USD\$240 million, to carry out the purchase. Apparently, the GOZ feels that the combined effect of good rains, economic gains from its new monetary policy, its existing grainstocks and the 800,000 MT it plans to import will obviate the need for continued general food aid assistance.

110. Comment. Estimates for the 2004 harvest of maize in Zimbabwe have ranged between 600,000 MT and 1.2 million MT. With the good rains over the past month, most observers now believe that the figure will be closer to 1 to 1.2 million MT. If this projected harvest is added to reported GMB stock of 240,000 MT and planned GOZ purchases of 800,000 MT, the GOZ would be able to meet its total maize needs of approximately 1.8 million MT. If the GOZ is able to reach only half of its optimistic import plans, then it would still be not that far off from meeting the country's cereal needs. If these assumptions bear out, the GOZ would be in a position to control substantial amounts of food stocks as we approach the March 2005 election. At the same time, it's important to recognize that it's still several months before the harvest and these figures are only preliminary. Additionally, more important than looking at the cereal balance sheet (total harvest plus imported food plus carryover stocks, minus projected consumption needs and exports) is to look at household access to food. In the coming months, WFP will be conducting a vulnerability assessment and FAO will be leading an annual crop and food supply assessment mission, which will provide better data on household vulnerability. Post will keep Washington informed as these assessments progress. End Comment.

111. Consistent with GOZ statements that it would like to end large-scale general food aid distribution, the UN Resident Representative reported that the GOZ intends to expand its Cash-for-Work programs, which have been largely under-funded and the subject of numerous credible allegations of political abuse. The GOZ has asked the UN to re-focus the CAP towards concentrating on improving social sector services, focusing on recovery and on food security for highly vulnerable groups such as those affected by HIV/AIDS.

THE OUTLOOK FOR ZIMBABWE'S VULNERABLE

12. Even with good rains, Post and other major donors are convinced that food security will remain a problem in Zimbabwe for some time to come, absent a radical shift in the GOZ's policy approach. At present, many of Zimbabwe's most vulnerable are relying on food aid to meet their basic needs. While this forms an important safety net for the most vulnerable, it has often substituted as livelihood support, which does little to break the cycle of poverty.

13. Zimbabwe has recently made modest improvements in economic policy with the Reserve Bank's new monetary policy, in particular realizing an exchange rate closer to market levels. Should economic policies continue to improve beyond the realm of monetary policy, such that hyper-inflation begins to recede, the suffering of the most vulnerable would begin to ease. Unfortunately, however, there are not signs of the GOZ's willingness to institute broader economic reforms or, more importantly, address the underlying political crisis that precipitated the country's economic downspiral.

14. For these reasons, we expect that under any scenario certain groups will remain highly vulnerable and will likely need ongoing humanitarian assistance. These include chronically ill persons, those infected or affected by HIV/AIDS or other diseases (in particular orphans, vulnerable children and the elderly) and transient people who have been removed from their land and have no legitimate place to settle.

CONCLUSION

15. There is a growing consensus towards eliminating general food distribution programs in Zimbabwe, in favor of programs more targeted to reach specific groups of highly vulnerable. International development partners are concerned about creating dependency and the continued lack of cooperation from the GOZ. Donors also recognize the need for a different approach given that Zimbabwe will likely be experiencing food insecurity for some time to come. Coming from a different angle, the GOZ has also called for an end to general feeding and has requested changes in the CAP to eliminate any reference to such feeding programs. This uneasy convergence is an evolving process. Undoubtedly the GOZ's new stance will present added challenges for NGOs working in the field, and their job will only be made more difficult by heightened pre-election tensions and sensitivities.

SULLIVAN